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ABSTRACT

An answer to aliteracy involves literary inquiry in which teachers teach students how to ask their own questions in working through a piece of literature. Three approaches to such literary study are improvisational, interpretive, and intellectual inquiry. A literary schema that students can use as an instrument to get started on their road to the particular questions they feel a literary work poses provides questions for literary inquiry such as (1) Which scenes or incidents in the literary work suggest a dramatic means for involving the students in the experience of the work? (2) What questions of character does the work pose? (3) What questions of setting does the work pose? (4) What personal questions does the work pose? (5) What self-discovery do you experience from reading and thinking about this piece of literature? and (6) What kinds of questions arise in this work that might assist you to better understand and appreciate the order and meaning of your own existence? By guiding students through various levels of cognition implicit in a literary work, teachers can lead students into a process of literary self-discovery that is much more exciting and stimulating than experiencing literature as mere content to be mastered. (HOD)

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An Antidote for Aliteracy

Aliteracy - "People Who Can Read But Won't"

I found "aliteracy" recently in an Art Seidenbaum column of the Los Angeles Times.[1] He goes on to discuss the manifestations of this reading problem with some chilling observations:

> . . . . We have the term 'paperwork' to describe the unpleasantness of words wasted or words overused. We have no term, by contrast, such as 'paperjoy' to describe the exquisite rewards of reading for pleasure. . . . Aliteracy threatens to undermine all the institutions dependent upon a citizenry willing to study, choose, decide - and make its influence felt. Democracy itself requires reading and requires readers who pursue the process for the pleasure of participation. . . . If broadcast slogans become the basis for decision, then surely the people who don't read will one day become a servant class of people who do.

An answer to aliteracy involves literary inquiry in which teachers teach students how to ask their own questions in working through a piece of literature. By guiding students through various levels of cognition implicit in a literary work, teachers can lead students into a process of literary self discovery that is much more exciting and stimulating than experiencing literature as mere content to be mastered.

I wish to suggest three approaches to literature study that a colleague and I introduced in a 1982 text on the subject,[2] approaches we call improvisational, interpretive, and intellectual inquiry.

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Though the text is geared to literature teachers, particularly teachers of adolescents, and emphasizes ways teachers can develop questions and activities that provoke student response to literature, I have found that one can turn inquiry over to the students by asking them to pose their own questions for class discussion.

Students, however, must first be made to realize that questions are many times more enlightening - and interpretive - than teacher-imposed or teacher-induced answers and that they do have the intuitive machinery and/or aesthetic sensitivity to discover for themselves what meanings a literary work contains - at least those meanings within their experiential periphery.

What follows is a very basic (even rudimentary) literary schema, which I ask students to use as an instrument to get started on their road to the particular questions they feel a literary work poses. And I remind them to think of questions they feel need an answer even though the answer is not readily available to them. Once the class minds start brainstorming questions (usually in small group sessions of 4 - 6 students), it is exciting, even humbling, to see how answers do evolve and how answers raise other questions. The bottom line, of course, is that they inevitably dig out most of the literary meaning I find and often go well beyond what I find, energizing my teaching and providing me with new, exciting insights. Students get interested and excited when they see teacher discovering and re-discovering. In fact, they rather enjoy repeating the experience.

Literary Inquiry Schema

Improvisational Inquiry

1. Which scenes or incidents in the literary work suggest a dramatic means for involving the students in the experience of the work, i.e. role playing?

2. What kinds of dramatic situations at work in the lives of the students could you create that would better prepare students for imaginative entry into this particular work? In other words, what in the human events of your students' own time is happening that corresponds to something similar in the poem or story to be read and discussed?

Interpretive Inquiry

1. What questions of character does the work pose?

2. What questions of setting does the work pose (realistic, fantastic, absurd)?

3. What technical questions does the work pose, i.e.
   A. Structure and form?
   B. Image and Symbol?
   C. Theme?
   D. Language?

Intellectual Inquiry

1. What personal questions does the work pose, i.e. questions that prompt you to examine your feelings, emotions, intuitions?

2. What self discovery do you experience from reading and thinking about this piece of literature?

3. What kinds of questions arise in this work that might assist you to better understand and appreciate the order and meaning of your own existence?

4. What kinds of questions arise that help you to:
   A. Adopt a self-satisfying identity?
   B. Cope with loneliness and alienation?
   C. Comprehend and interpret man's humanity and inhumanity?

With regard to the Schema, I rarely use the improvisational questions with college students, simply because the resulting activities are too time-consuming, but I recommend them for younger students, particularly middle school or junior high.
Teachers tell me they work wonderfully well with young students and with reluctant readers both in junior and senior high. The improvisational activity, or what I call dramatic entry to a work of literature, is usually a necessary first step to take if one ever expects to build up an initial friendship with the reading world.

The intellectual inquiry intends to relate the world of the literary piece to the world of what is happening in the lives of the students, and it works well with junior high students, but particularly well with senior high students. The kinds of questions intellectual inquiry induces spark lazy, uninterested readers to response and often are a necessary beginning to the study of the underlying meaning in a poem or story (interpretive inquiry). The teacher gauges his/her class and makes the decision as to which approach a class will react to. Often, one approach leads to another or two approaches are at work simultaneously. No matter, as long as students are eager to relate and respond. Anything in response orientation that gets the think tanks going is an important contribution to hooking kids on literary study.

Students benefit from the methods in these ways: 1) they participate in creative activities designed to facilitate understanding of the imaginative aspects of literature; 2) they possess a clearer understanding of the literal content of the work for better reading

comprehension; and 3) they apply concepts from the works first to the specifics of everyday life and eventually to the universals that characterize the human condition. What I am saying, really, is that application leads students to their own discoveries about what a work means - and that is as it should be.

The following paper was received from a student in a freshmen literature class (Appreciation of Literature), a General Education elective, taken primarily by non-English majors. The writer addressed himself (It was a himself.) only to the interpretive inquiry on the literary schema to interpret the poem "Science" by Robinson Jeffers. The interpretive inquiry paper is a requirement for the course, and because the students in the class are university students, they focus primarily on interpretive inquiry with regard to interpretation. Not that the other approaches are not workable in such a class (They are occasionally.) but because these students are mature and sophisticated enough to go at a work of literature head on. Interpretive inquiry works sufficiently well enough to provoke response from college or university students and engages them in fruitful inquiry.

The poem "Science" is not an "easy read," as my students say, and may be too difficult for many high school students. Still, the process is the same, and it will work with students of high school age for whatever poem or literary work a teacher wants his or her class to study and interpret. The writer here posed his own questions for my review and was then told to write a one-two page explication of the poem, answering only his questions. This paper is representative of the 5-10 best I receive each semester in a course of this kind, and I think the questions and explication would catch the attention of even the most erudite literary critic.

SCIENCE [3]

Man, introverted man, having crossed
In passage and but a little with the nature of
        things this latter century
Has begot giants; but being taken up
Like a maniac with self-love and inward con-
        flicts cannot manage his hybrids.

Being used to deal with edgeless dreams,
Now he's bred knives on nature turns them also
        inward: they have thirsty points though.
His mind forbodes his own destruction;
Actaeon who saw the goddess naked among
        leaves and his hounds tore him.
A little knowledge, a pebble from the shingle,
A drop from the oceans: who would have
        dreamed this infinitely little too much?

--Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962)

Interpretive Questions for the Poem, "Science," by Robinson Jeffers.

Julian Grembla

1. Why does Jeffers call our attention in this poem to Man as "introverted" man?

2. Man has always lived with Nature, but has this relationship changed somehow in "this latter century?"

3. What kinds of "giants" do you see that man "has begot?"

4. Why does the poet refer to some of man's creations as "hybrids?"

5. Can we see any effects of this "maniac" man's inability to "manage his hybrids?"

6. What does he mean by "edgeless dreams?"

7. What are these man-created "knives" that "turn inward" and have "thirsty points?"

8. Why is it that modern man's mind "forbodes his own destruction?"

9. In what way has Man become a new Actaeon?

10. With man's great accomplishments why does Jeffers call man's knowledge "A little knowledge, a pebble from the shingle, a drop from the oceans?"

11. What can be an "infinitely little" that has become "too much?"

THE ANSWER

In this short but powerful poem Robinson Jeffers sounds the alarm to warn us of the fateful turn that modern Science has taken.

Throughout ages man -- the only animal capable of looking within himself, of thinking, of creating -- has "crossed....but a little with the nature of things." But in "this latter century" man has assaulted Nature with "giants." In this last century man has learned to travel under the oceans with the fish, to fly through the air with the birds and to free himself from earth's gravity.

However, Jeffers tells us that not all of the new Science crosses Nature "but a little." Man, "being taken up like a maniac," inspired only by selfishness and self-serving concern, has let his created "hybrids" run amok. He has combined the gift of fire with his chemicals to make man-destroying napalm; he has joined earth with hazardous elements to kill plants and birds; he has connected his

brain to computers to threaten individual privacy; he has contaminated streams with invented pollutants to deny life to fish; he has lifted into the sky the by-products of his machines to sicken mankind's very breath. But, most dreadful of all, his brain has manipulated the atom's natural energy to produce a force that may well doom mankind.

The introverted man of ages past -- from Plato and Aristotle through the Renaissance and the Age of Englightenment -- was "used to deal with edgeless dreams," with no sharp edges to do harm to man, but to understand and advance Truth and Beauty, the dignity of man and his liberty. But now man has created sharp "knives," cruel inventions with blades turned "inward" to the vulnerable heart of Nature and man and with points "thirsty" for the blood of Nature and man.

For man his new Science "forbodes his own destruction." In mythology the hounds that killed Actaeon were his own; in our age the fruits of man's genius may destroy him. Man must be humble in acknowledging that his must be only "a little knowledge" if its myopic concerns assure his demise; a great knowledge serves and ennobles Nature and man.

Thus the last lines of the poem present to me two meanings: "This infinitely little" knowledge in its destructive results may prove "too much" for man's ability to survive. A prophetic statement may also be intended by Jeffers (who preceded the hydrogen bomb) because "this infinitely little" atom (and even this split again by man) has proved "too much" for men to control.

To the literary purist I suppose all of this smacks too much of a personalized, social approach to literature - and it is. For adolescents, that is probably enough if our intent is to hook them on reading good literature. It's my interest anyway, my antidote to aliteracy, and the approach does not ignore aesthetics, what I call the fine points of style and form.

This inquiry method is an attempt to silence the reaction too often heard in school hallways from adolescents that goes something like, "I don't want to read anymore of that crap." For too long, I fear, we have been trying to cram, stuff, and force-feed literary art into young people like so many cans of baby food, trying to develop (unsuccessfully) overnight critics. Students who are constantly making

discoveries, finding out for themselves what is useful, enjoyable, and worth retaining rather than being told what is there (i.e. arousing their literary sensitivity instead of implanting our own) are the students who will come back looking for more.

The payoff will come for me when a student says something approaching what Henry Newmann wrote in 1931: "I enjoyed this poem even though it is a literary masterpiece."[4]

Notes

1. Art Seidenbaum, "Endpapers" (editor's column), Los Angeles Times, 19 Feb. 1984, Book Section, p. 11.

2. Jerry Sullivan and John Hurley, Teaching Literature Inductively (Anaheim, California: Canterbury Press, 1982).

3. K. L. Knickerbocker and H. Willard Reninger, Interpreting Literature - Shorter Edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p. 344.

4. Henry Neumann, "Moral Values in Literature Teaching," English Journal, 20 (1931), 812.